As in the Days of Adam

A Visit to the Doukhobors of Western Canada

By Maurice G. Hindus

In my wanderings in western Canada I had heard many extraordinary tales of a sect of Russian peasants who have been sponsoring periodic nude pilgrimages. There are, I was told, not any more than about two hundred members in the sect, mostly elderly folk. Originally they were Doukhobors, and though the outside world still thinks of them as such, they now form a society all their own. They call themselves Svobodniki, Freedomites.

Upon investigation I learned that nudity, though the most sensational, is by no means the most significant aspect of their stern denial of civilization. God, they argue, does not grow cooked foods; and so man should not eat anything that has touched fire. And they don't; they subsist exclusively upon raw foods. Why cut hair and shave, they ask? If God did not want flowing locks on man's head and a beard on his face, he would n't grow them. They will not eat salt, sugar, pepper, vinegar or other spices and condiments. God, they maintain, created all living things to work out their own destiny in their own way. Therefore man has no right to subject any of them to his use. And they don't. Not only will they kill no living thing; they will eat no eggs or milk products nor wear anything made of hides. Several years ago they turned all their stock out upon the prairies, to free "God's dumb creatures" from the slavery of man. They will not even work a horse. Instead of plowing, they will spade up their land, and do all their other work by hand.

God, they declare, wants man to work and live in the open, in field and forest, like bird and beast. Therefore man should abandon the city and the factory and the machine. And they have. They will not live in the city or work in a factory or use any machinery. One of the things they cannot forgive the Doukhobors for is their practice of sending a certain portion of their men to work in the city during the winter months. Once they heard of a strike of miners. To show their sympathy for the strikers and to protest against the employment of human beings in mines and factories, they called a mass-meeting, delivered speeches, sang hymns, and concluded the celebration by burning an old reaper one of them possessed. At another time a group of them assembled in a newly built village in Saskatchewan, stripped themselves bare, built a bonfire of their clothes, and amidst the chanting of Psalms flung their money into the flames, one hundred and sixty dollars, all they had between

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them, as an example to the world of what to do with the root of all evil. On another occasion they resolved to protest against the Doukhobors for their increasing worldliness and their continuous and blasphemous compromises with civilization, as evidenced in their adoption of modern machinery, modern business methods, and, treachery of treacheries, their erection of a separate office building. They decided to burn this building in the hope that the act would waken their erring brethren into a realization of their perverse ways and bring them back to the fold of Christ. On a certain evening they gathered to carry out their resolve. Yet before setting fire to the structure they had condemned, they pried open the windows, climbed inside, and with lighted candles in their hands marched from room to room and floor to floor, searching for birds, lest any might perish in the flames.

I had been told that in Thrums, British Columbia, I should find some of their most influential leaders, and so I went there to pay them a visit. Thrums sprawls over a jagged valley that serves as a connecting floor between two walls of mountains. It is like a slice of Russia grafted upon Canadian soil. Russian speech floats in the air; Russian folk-tunes, with their long-drawn-out plaintiveness, resound over the mountain-sides; Russian women and girls, working in gardens and orchards, barefooted, and with bright kerchiefs over their heads, dot the landscape. Nearly all the settlers are Russian, laborers in the near-by sawmills or independent farmers possessing small parcels of land, which they cultivate with zeal and upon which they raise unexcelled fruit and vegetables. From a group of ragged boys who had gathered at the station to meet the train I learned the location of the various Svobodniki farms. I went to one that was screened off from the road by a thick orchard. It nestled in the very shadow of a wooded mountain. It was a small place of not over ten acres, spread over a gently sloping hillside, on top of which slouched two small old and outwardly neglected houses, built near and at right angles to each other. At one time this place was the seat of the Svobodnik society. It still serves as a rendezvous for its scattered members when they come together. At present it is the abode of two childless couples, elderly people.

I went to one of the houses. The door was wide open, and, following peasant custom, I walked in without knocking. What a delightfully typical peasant home it was! The walls were freshly whitewashed, the girders unplaned and unpainted, and long planks were fastened to the walls, for chairs and lounges, and the eternal *polati*-platform, stretching from one end of the room to the other, took the place of a bed, just like the homes of our peasants in the old village, except that no icons adorned the walls, and no pigs and chickens strutted about the floor.

At an open window, with her back toward me, bent over a piece of sewing, sat a middle-aged woman, barefooted and bareheaded, with her thin gray hair slicked back straight and done into a braid, with a white ribbon at the end, not at all in the manner of a person renouncing man-made aids of adornment. She did not hear me enter, and when I spoke to her, she turned round and eyed me with suspicion. Without waiting to be ques-

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tioned, I explained to her who I was and what I had come for, and instantly she grew animated, leaped from her chair, and, excitedly muttering words of warm welcome, began to bustle about to entertain me.

"*Nu*, and I thought you were an Anghlick," she apologized, "come from the Government with a complaint. Ah, a Russian from New York! *Nu, synok* [little son], I 'll set the table at once. How hungry you must be after such a long journey! And we have lots of food—lots." And suiting action to word, despite my vigorous protests that I had just partaken of a hearty meal, she rushed dish after dish upon the table. And what fare! Heads of lettuce, raw carrots, freshly pulled onions, raw peanuts, peaches, raisins, plums, and raw potatoes.

"Sit down, *synok;* sit down," she said, and fairly shoved me into a seat at the head of the table. "Eat, eat, *synok;* don't say you are not hungry after such a long and arduous journey. You must be hungry; of course you must be, and our food is not like yours. It is unspoiled by cooking; it is just as God grows it, and as all of God's creatures save men eat it." Dish after dish rattled its way toward me.

"Maybe you 'd like some of our bread? Ah, I 've forgotten!" Off she dashed, soon returning not with a loaf, but with a glass jar filled with something that looked like corn meal sprinkled with pepper. She shoved a bowl toward me and poured some of the substance into it. "That 's our bread," she chattered on. "We make it ourselves, *synok*, from wheat, raw peanuts, raisins, sun-dried apples and plums, which we mix and grind. Delicious bread! *Nu*, just try it. Slice peaches and plums into it, as we do, and mix it. Wonderful feed that is, *synok!* We eat barrels of it in winter. It 's so strengthening!"

I plied her with questions, which she answered only too eagerly. Of course it took courage to be a Svobodnik in the face of the opposition of the whole world. It was hard at first to live on raw foods. It made them sick, and every time the smell of *shctchui* (soup) reached their nostrils, they were overcome with a painful desire to taste cooked foods. That was because their systems had been poisoned by their previous mode of living and craved unnatural things. But now, *ekh!* they won't look at cooked dishes. One of their women fell sick once. An Anghlick told her that if she ate hot soup she would get well. She followed the Anghlick's advice, and of course they had to discharge her from the society. It is a great joy to be a Svobodnik, to live in tune with God and nature; only Canada is such a worldly country, even in the mountains, offers so many temptations that seduce the young people. If they could only get back to Russia! Did I know Lenin? Could n't I intercede for them and beg the new ruler of Russia to let them in and give them small parcels of land, enough only for fruits and vegetables for themselves? Did the Bolsheviki actually kill off people in Russia? It could not be that they were killing peasants? It must be landlords and the czar's relatives they were putting to death. Why should any one want to kill muzhiks? Muzhiks have nothing, anyway. Ah, if they could only get back to the land of their birth!

Soon the man of the house entered. Ivan was his name. He was a leader of the sect, and what an arresting personality! Tall, gaunt, erect, with

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a massive head and heavy dark hair that straggled in waves over his sun-baked neck and ears. His broad, bony face seemed sunk in a lustrous black beard, which, together with his hard, gleaming eyes, overhung by heavy brows, lent him an air of medieval austerity that awed and yet fascinated. Greeting me cordially he sat down beside me and, peasant fashion, pelted me, in between bites of onions, carrot, and radishes, with personal questions. At last he said:

"*Nu*, we are happy to entertain you. We are always glad to have strangers visit us, and quite a good many come, especially Anghlicks. You see, out in the world people think that we always go naked, that that is all we believe in. And do you know, brother, people come to look at us. Yes, and when they find us in our clothes, they are disappointed. Sometimes they will ask us if we won't disrobe, go out in the sun, and pose for them, so they can take pictures. Why do you suppose they do it? Do they want to sell these pictures and make money! *Akh*, what people will do for money! But we are simple-minded people, and we don't mind what others say or think of us. Christ says love thine enemy as thyself, and we believe in Christ. Our homes, our cellars, our orchards, our gardens, our hearts, are open to all. That 's the way Christ wants us to be."

"You see, *synok*," the woman interposed, "we are not like the people in your world. Your people teach even children to be selfish and cruel. In your world, if a baby lolls around on the floor, and some living thing crawls near it, what do you do? You say to the baby, 'Kill it! kill it!' And sometimes you set the example yourselves, and step upon the innocent thing and crush it. Yes? And do you know what we do? We say to our baby, *'Va-va! va-va!* Don't touch! don't touch! It hurts, it hurts.' "

"But some creatures," I protested, "have to be destroyed."

"What ones?" Ivan flared back.

"Why," I replied, "flies and snakes and gophers. Think what—"

But Ivan would not let me continue.

"Look, brother," he said pointing with his eyes at the ceiling, the walls, the floor. "Do you see any flies in this house? Hardly any, yes? And it 's the end of summer, too, with autumn smelling in the air, when flies rush inside of houses for shelter. And do you know why we have no flies? Because we live a natural life. We don't do any cooking and don't use any sugar and other vile foods that attract them. And snakes? *Nu ladno* [very well]." He rose, took a few steps away from the table, and continued, acting out his words in the manner of a man taking the part of the grave-digger in "Hamlet."

"Here am I, a man. *Da*, a man. I am walking along a road—a road. And here at this place I see a snake. And I, the man, step upon the snake with my heel and crush it, and right here before me lies the snake, dead—dead! And now tell me who is the snake, the thing that 's dead, or I, the man?"

"So, so," said his wife, and nodded with evident delight.

"And now you say kill gophers; they ruin crops. *Ekh*, brother, if every man would work as we do, there would be enough for gophers and for birds, more than enough. But do you know what it means to kill a gopher? I 'll tell you what it means. You kill a

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gopher, you kill a mouse; you kill a mouse, you kill a rabbit; you kill a rabbit, you kill a squirrel; you kill a squirrel, you kill a cow; you kill a cow, you kill a horse; you kill a horse, you kill a man!"

§ 2

We went out into the orchard and sat down on the ground, in the sun. Other Svobodniki joined us, long-bearded men and barefooted women, eager to talk themselves out.

"To the outside world we are a crazy people," Ivan explained; "yes, crazy. We don't work horses, we don't use machines, we don't eat cooked foods, we don't kill snakes. Perhaps we are crazy. Who knows? We are not educated. We don't want to be. Why should we? Is God educated? You see, we believe in God, and do you know what belief in God means? Do you think it means going to church and dropping on your knees and crossing yourself incessantly and praying and sobbing yourself hoarse with repentance? What foolishness! We have no prayers; we don't pray. Once a Russian came to visit us. He was a poor man, and we offered him shelter. He stayed with us about half a year. He was Orthodox, and, ah, how pious! He 'd rise in the middle of the night, get down on his knees in the dark, and pray, pray, pray, sobbing his heart out to God, and keeping us awake for hours. But we said nothing. We are Svobodniki; we believe in every one doing as he pleases. And one morning he was gone. He had disappeared in the night. And then we discovered that the hundred dollars we had saved up had also disappeared. *Nu*, what good is prayer to such a man?"

He paused, brushed back the hair the wind had blown over his face, and continued:

"God, brother, means love, and do you know what love means? Love means freedom, absolute, everlasting freedom, to let every one do not as books and priests and man-made laws prescribe, but as his own inner spirit dictates. That 's freedom. And, *nu*, how much freedom have you in your world? You have nations, governments, schools, property, and machines, the wickedest of all things, and all these kill freedom; and when you kill freedom, you kill love; and when you kill love, you kill God. Smile, if you please; it 's so, though. You are educated, yes? You live in a big city, New York. Is it as big as Chicago? I was in Chicago once, but I 've never been in New York. And where you live, you 've got to dress and eat and talk and pray just as other people tell you. *Nu*, how much freedom have you in New York? And then in New York you are all grasping after the cent; and when you get it, you clutch at it with all your might, as though the cent was all there is to life. No, brother, you have no freedom; you are all slaves in the outside world, slaves of the machine and of the cent. But we have freedom. We 'd rather have freedom than food. Listen!

"It was about eleven years ago. A crowd of us marched into the village of Verigin, Saskatchewan. It was daytime, and we removed our clothes and threw them into a heap and set them afire, and then we took up all the money we had between us and flung that into the flames. You see, we had rid ourselves of our money, our clothes, of every bit of property we had; we had nothing left. We were as poor as on

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the day we came into the world; none could be poorer than we. And yet we were free. We felt so happy that we sang. When you have freedom, brother, you need no clothes, no money, nothing, to make you happy."

"So, so, so," said the other Svobodniki, nodding in elation.

Since he touched on the question of clothes, I made bold to ask for an explanation of the nude pilgrimages.

"It is simple enough, brother," Ivan began. "Now look! This is my shirt, made of linen, which we ourselves have woven; and these are my trousers, likewise made of linen. We make these clothes ourselves, from spinning to sewing. And under these clothes is my body, and that 's the work of God. Now the clothes are our own work, the work of man, and of them I am not ashamed; but the body is the work of God, and of that I am ashamed. *Nu*, is there reason in that? What is there about the body that man should be ashamed of? If God is not ashamed of it, if it is the very image of God, why should man be? Did Adam have clothes? Do beasts wear clothes? Do birds wear clothes? Supposing you threw a cloak over the back of a goat, how would it look? It 's the same with man, brother. Only man's mind is poisoned; yes, poisoned by the things that rob him of freedom, and that 's why he thinks that the body is a terrible thing and should be covered up. But we Svobodniki say, freedom, freedom of the body from the poison that gets in there from foods that are boiled and broiled and roasted, and freedom of the mind from false and poisonous ideas, from slavery and from the things that cruel, selfish people have invented who did not know what freedom meant."

As I was listening to these speeches I could not help thinking of Tolstoy. How that sublime barbarian would glow with joy at such fiery denunciation of Western civilization! In essence the Svobodnik view of life is boldly Tolstoyan. I am not so sure but the ironic Christian nihilist would even approve of the nude pilgrimages.

"I suppose you are followers of Tolstoy," I said. To my amazement, the name did not seem to register animation.

"Tolstoy," one of them repeated—"was not he a general in the czar's army?"

"No, he was a writer, one of the greatest that has ever lived."

"A writer?" Ivan repeated in a tone of indifference. "Then he was not of much account."

§ 3

One evening we gathered in the home of a young Svobodnik. Ilya was his name, a blond, blue-eyed, wiry, handsome, boyish-looking youth, with a shrill musical voice such as good tenors have. He was married to Lusha, or, rather, lived with her, for Svobodniki do not recognize marriage. Like Tolstoy, they regard celibacy as the ideal life; but when a man and woman do decide to live together, they are "brother and sister." Lusha was one of the prettiest Russian girls I had seen in western Canada, slender, bob-haired, with deep-blue eyes, dark brows, full red lips, and a fine set of teeth. She was the daughter of a Doukhobor and no Svobodnik. In the morning, while Ilya would get his breakfast in the garden and orchard, she would bake potato pancakes for herself and fry potatoes and make tea.

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When I came to the house she was busy amidst baskets of tomatoes and peaches, which she was canning for winter use. When Ilya introduced her to me as "my sister," she indignantly protested, insisting she was his wife.

"I believe in absolute freedom," he explained, "and when a man has a wife, he has a possession, and there are no possessions in the kingdom of heaven. If Lusha ever falls in love with any one else—"

"But I won't," Lusha interrupted, almost with a scream.

"I only wanted to say that if you should—"

"I won't, though," she persisted. "You know I only love you."

Being a man, he yielded, and did not refer to the subject again. Lusha served supper. At one end of the table sat the Svobodniki, and before them she set down plates of cucumbers, tomatoes, radishes, watermelons, onions; at the other end were a Doukhobor friend, she, and I, and before us she placed hot soup, cakes, bread, and jam. It was one of the most memorable meals I 've ever had. In the pale light of the lamp, in that whitewashed hut in the Canadian Rockies, the long-haired Svobodniki, in their white-linen garments, crunching away with zest at raw fruits and vegetables, seemed a pathetic and unearthly sight. Ivan asked Lusha if she had any oatmeal in the house. She went to the cellar, soon returning with a big box of oatmeal, which she handed to Ivan. He poured some into a bowl, sprinkled raisins over it, poured in water, stirred it, and began to eat it, praising highly its gustatory and nutritive qualities. He ate it with so much relish that I had not the heart to inform him that the commercial oatmeal in question is far from being an uncooked food.

There was an old Svobodnik woman at the table. She was over eighty, bent and toothless, and with a face that seemed like a lump of withered flesh without bones. She was one of the most talkative persons there, and in the course of the evening she narrated an experience she had which illuminates the Svobodnik attitude toward suffering.

"A group of us," she began, "had gone to a certain village on a pilgrimage. We stopped at the railroad station and began to sing. A crowd had gathered, and one of our men who could talk a little of the Anghlick language explained to the people there what it meant to be a Svobodnik. He told them that we believed in absolute freedom, and that even the clothes we wore were a sign of slavery. Then in protest against the slavery in the world we disrobed. We were arrested, and sent to an insane asylum. There they took us into a ward and told us we must go to work; but we refused. Then two persons threw me to the floor. Of course I did not resist. We Svobodniki believe if people want to beat us or cut us up, let them do it. Our spirit will make us insensible to the pain. Then these two persons jammed a brush into my hand and shouted, 'Now will you work?' And I shook my head, and said: 'No. Let me out of here. I have done no one harm.' Then they grabbed my hands and beat them against the floor until I lost all sense of feeling, and after that they stood me up against the wall, seized my arms, twisted them back, forced my mouth open with an iron thing, which they rolled around inside until they wrenched two of my teeth out and tore off a strip of flesh inside

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of my right cheek, and the blood gushed forth and soaked my clothes. Then they flung me to the floor, dragged me around, kicked me into a corner, and left me there. And when I came to I clambered to my feet and stepped over to the window. I looked outside at the sky and the sun, and of a sudden I felt Christ in my heart, and light came to my soul, and I felt free and happy and began to sing."

§ 4

That night I lay awake for a long time, meditating. How childish these Svobodniki seemed! How futile their outlook upon life, and their impossible anarchic conceptions of freedom! To an Anglo-Saxon, with his orderly ways, his utilitarian aspirations, his search for a comfortable berth in the world, the efforts of these unread, unlettered muzhiks to attain a certain peculiar standard of spiritual perfection must appear absurd and irrational. But, then, judged by Anglo-Saxon standards, are Raskolnikov, Prince Mishkin, Ivan Laramazov, or his brother Alyosha, the saint, persons of normal mind? And what of Tolstoy himself, renouncing in his old age fame and fortune and fleeing in the dark of night from a comfortable home and a loving family to a distant wilderness in the hope of finding peace of soul?

As I lay there meditating, I was suddenly interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Are you asleep?" It was Ivan, the leader of the sect, standing at the doorway of my room.

"No," I replied. "Come in."

I lighted the lamp, and he sat down on a box beside my bed.

"Don't think unkindly of me for coming again," he said apologetically. "I don't mean to disturb you, but there was something else about the Svobodniki that may interest you and the paper for which you are going to write about us, and as you expect to leave in the morning, I thought I 'd come back and tell you about it. You see, we don't bury our dead."

I could hardly believe his words.

"No, we don't; we just throw them out on the grass."

"But—"

"I know what you are going to say, but this is the way we think. When a man is dead, his soul is gone, and his flesh is of no use for anything except for a feast for the wild beasts. People think that 's terrible. They think the body is something sacred. But it is not. Leave it somewhere, and it rots and becomes filthy. Of course the dead person's relatives cry and mourn, and they want to dress him up and put him into a casket with flowers and other ornaments, but he 'll rot, anyway. When a man dies, his friends and relatives should rejoice and sing, for he has gone into the kingdom of eternal bliss. That 's the way we think."

"But don't they arrest you for doing that?"

He only shrugged his shoulders.

"I 'll tell you what happened to us once several years ago. We went on a long pilgrimage, and we came to Fort William. One of our party died. It was winter. We got a sled, put the corpse in there naked, and covered it with a black cloth. We wanted to take it to the cemetery of the Anghlicks and throw it out there on the ground. But we did n't know where the cemetery was, and so, as we passed through the town, we stopped and asked. A policeman became suspi-

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cious, and he came over and asked us what we had on the sled.

" 'A corpse,' we told him.

" 'Where are you going with it?'

" 'To the cemetery.'

" 'Have you got a grave dug?'

" 'He does not need a grave.'

" 'How are you going to bury him?'

" 'We won't. We 'll just throw him on the ground.'

" 'Have you a coffin?'

" 'Of what use,' said we, 'is a coffin to him? He 'll feel just as comfortable without one.'

" 'Have you a permit?'

" 'A permit?' said we. 'He 's already got his permit from Jesus Christ.'

" 'Well,' he said, 'you can't go.'

"Of course we would n't fight with him, and when we realized he would n't let us go to the cemetery, we lifted the corpse off the sled, threw it at the policeman's feet, marched around several times singing, 'Farewell, comrade,' and departed."

He rose to go.

"*Nu,* I won't disturb you any longer, brother," he said on leaving. "I only hope that you will not remember us in evil. We are simple people. We have not as nice ways and as nice things as educated people. We don't want them. But we have given you the best we had, and if you come again, whether you write well of us or not, we shall welcome you just the same. And if you tell your friends about us, and they say to you that we are crazy, just tell them that perhaps we are, but that we are honest folk and that we earn our living with our hands and that our great joy is to fulfil the will of Christ."

Gulls

BY JEAN STARR UNTERMEYER

The sun was shining so upon the river,
That scattered ice-floes, swaying on the water,
Seemed winter-lilies, opened and inviting
Gulls to their slumber.

But gulls were circling in a nervous pattern,
Impelled by something other than the morning,
Searching with darting eye and balanced pinion,
Wanting no Lethe.

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